

**Student Attrition And Retention In Ontario's Colleges**

*by Catherine Drea, Ed.D.*

**Introduction**

Student attrition and retention in Ontario's colleges have been of concern to governments and administrators since the mid-1970's when attrition was estimated at 50 percent (Giroux and Mezei, 1993). As a result of this concern, there have been efforts aimed at increasing student retention in Ontario's colleges. This is by no means a problem limited to postsecondary education in Ontario. Calder and Gordon (1995/1996), in their research on attrition in Canada, cite the Economic Council of Canada which reported an overall 33 percent post-secondary attrition rate in 1992.

In order to reduce attrition, governments and institutions must work on increasing retention. Retention is described as students who complete diploma/certificate programs. This article addresses student attrition and retention in Ontario's colleges through discussion of attrition rates, factors influencing attrition and recommendations for increasing retention. For the purposes of this article, attrition refers to the withdrawal by students from diploma/certificate/applied degree programs prior to completion or graduation.

**Discussion**

The report of the Ontario College Restructuring Steering Committee (1995) presented student retention as an important issue for students, institutions and the government because attrition increases the challenges and costs for students and academic program planners. Additional research (Calder & Gordon, 1995/1996; Gomme & Gilbert, 1984) confirm that there are both financial and human costs associated with attrition for students, taxpayers and institutions. These include student costs for lost tuition and fees, potential loss of employment prospects and earning potential. With respect to institutional losses, these can include lost revenue and decreasing budgets resulting from lower grants, reduced tuition and other fees and wasted resources including empty seats in programs. Taxpayers' confidence can be undermined when they look to the Key Performance Indicators in Ontario and see a provincial attrition rate of 57.0 percent in 2002-2003. The Steering Committee (1995) supports the notion that attrition undermines public confidence in the college system and can lead to questions about accountability and the management of public funds.

**Attrition Rates**



According to research conducted by Dance (1990) for Vision 2000, there was a 43 percent average student attrition rate in Ontario's colleges between 1976-1984. This research suggests that the average attrition rate fell from the 50 percent rate that Giroux and Mezei (1993) reported for the mid-1970's. Unfortunately, Ontario colleges have not been able to reduce the system-wide student attrition rate much over the years. Table 1 indicates that Ontario colleges had a 56.5 percent graduation rate from 1998-2003. This translates to a 43.5% attrition rate.

**Table 1. Graduation Rates in Ontario Colleges – 1998-2003**

<b>College</b>	<b>98-99 KPI 97-98 Grads %</b>	<b>99-00 KPI 98-99 Grads %</b>	<b>00-01 KPI 99-00 Grads %</b>	<b>01-02 KPI 00-01 Grads %</b>	<b>02-03 KPI 01-02 Grads %</b>	<b>03-04 KPI 02-03 Grads %</b>
Algonquin	60.9	58.9	55.3	62.2	60.6	60.2
Boréal	64.1	54.6	72.6	70.8	70.4	72.5
Boréal (Central-Southwest)*	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cambrian	50.0	51.9	59.4	58.7	61.3	65.5
Canadore	60.8	59.3	60.0	63.2	60.2	58.8
Centennial	43.4	48.5	52.0	50.6	52.3	52.7
La Cité	46.1	47.8	51.6	50.2	52.1	55.4
Conestoga	61.5	65.6	63.6	63.2	65.2	61.3
Confederation	72.1	60.6	70.5	64.4	55.1	55.5
Durham	55.2	52.1	57.0	59.8	58.5	59.5
Fanshawe	53.7	52.3	57.4	55.0	56.5	56.0
George Brown	59.2	60.7	61.3	59.6	54.5	55.3
Georgian	56.5	61.3	62.4	58.1	52.8	51.1
Humber	55.3	52.6	54.7	56.3	58.1	57.4
Lambton	44.8	50.6	62.4	63.9	51.7	56.3
Loyalist	60.7	56.8	54.2	54.3	52.6	53.9
Mohawk	49.0	48.9	50.6	52.4	50.0	50.9
Niagara	52.8	47.8	58.9	53.9	52.4	55.4
Northern	46.4	48.3	56.5	59.8	58.6	63.4
St. Clair	42.8	47.6	55.6	50.4	49.7	55.1
St. Lawrence	53.8	62.2	69.3	66.1	60.6	Pending
Sault	51.3	48.5	55.7	52.9	55.9	54.1
Seneca	45.8	48.0	51.6	49.4	51.1	50.8
Sheridan	71.4	71.0	67.3	69.3	68.1	70.1
Sir Sandford Fleming	65.5	66.4	59.6	60.5	61.5	63.7
<b>Province</b>	<b>55.6</b>	<b>54.8</b>	<b>57.7</b>	<b>57.3</b>	<b>56.4</b>	<b>57.0</b>

Source: Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2004.

Graduation Rates indicated for KPI Reporting Year 1998-99 & 1999-00 Graduation Rates calculated based on the cohort method.

Commencing 2000-01, Graduation Rates are based on tracking individual students,



where, for example, the 2001-02 KPI Graduation Rate is based on students who started one-year programs in 1999-00, two-year programs in 1997-98, and three-year programs in 1995-96, and who had graduated by 2000-01. 2001-02 KPI Graduation Rate includes changes resulting from the KPI Review and Adjustment process.

2003-04 Graduation rates from the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, 2004.

In terms of collecting data related to attrition and retention, the graduation rates in Ontario's colleges have been measured in two ways. In 1998-1999 and 1999-2000, graduation rates were measured by the Ontario government based on the cohort method. There were criticisms that this might not be the best way to measure as some students do not complete with their cohort but complete with other cohorts. Starting in 2000-2001, the graduation rates were calculated by tracking individual students through their college career.

Measuring student attrition also raises some concerns. In Ontario, we have considered students who leave a full-time program to become a part-time student as drop-outs. In addition, those who transfer to another program, transfer to another institution or transfer to university are not tracked and counted as graduates when they complete their new program. These are successful leavers. We should be measuring attrition by tracking individual students as they move through postsecondary education. Donner and Lazar (2000) suggest that we establish a system to identify successful from unsuccessful leavers by developing a province-wide student number system for each student for tracking purposes. We would then have a more accurate reflection of attrition.

It is appropriate to ask why attrition is not decreasing and why retention is not increasing when we have this data. Is it because we have not made a coordinated effort in our institutions to address retention strategies? Is it due to the fact that retention is not a priority for governments, students or institutions? Is it because we don't know how to design and implement retention strategies? We have the data to suggest we have a serious problem in Ontario colleges and the literature suggests (Tinto, 1987; Dance, 1990; Marinaccio, 1985; Duncan, 1985) that significant information exists on proven retention strategies. We are lacking an investment in retention programming by individual colleges. If we are to increase retention across the province, strategies must be developed and maintained by each institution. One size will not fit all. While there will be some retention strategies that will work for students in many institutions, the reasons for attrition are complex and individual student-based (Marinaccio, 1985). The reasons for leaving could relate to the local economy, financial issues, personal issues, academic issues or community issues and therefore must be viewed in the local college context.

### **Factors and Issues Influencing Retention**

According to a variety of research, we know that there are several factors that influence retention in colleges (Andres &



Carpenter, 1997; Tinto, 1987; Marinaccio, 1985). One of the key themes in the research on retention was proposed by Tinto in 1975 - the theory of academic and social integration as a predictor of student success. (Marinaccio, 1987; Andres & Carpenter, 1997). Tinto's theory is that students will be successful when there is a focus on individual students as learners and a genuine interest in student life by faculty and staff. Frequent interactions by students with faculty members will promote class participation and can lead to an increase in the level of student achievement. He further suggests that student involvement in institutional social activities leads to student success. Marinaccio (1985) further states that the size and services of the college and institutional policies and procedures are other indicators of student success.

Tinto (1996) suggests that student goal commitment and institutional commitment are very important to retention. He believes that students who know what their degree goal/major is at the time of entry are more likely to remain at a particular institution. Grayson (1996) would support this theory. In his study on leavers from Atkinson College, York University, he found that many students who left the university after their first year never intended to complete a degree.

Andres and Carpenter (1997) conducted research with the nontraditional student population including transfer students, older adult learners, commuters, part-time students, graduate students, women, students with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. They found that Tinto's model of student retention that focuses on student involvement is the most popular model but note that competing demands of parents, friends, romantic partners, employers, and others, as well as financial and health problems, can influence students' coping abilities and life decisions.

Marinaccio (1985) found that interventions that may reduce the attrition rate among one group of students might be ineffective when applied to a different group of students. He further notes that an increased awareness has developed of the cost of attrition, both to students and to community colleges. He suggests that studies have identified some basic characteristics that are linked with attrition and retention at the community college including academic factors such as the student's previous academic attainment, demographic factors, students' motivations and aspirations, and financial considerations.

Tinto (1996) and Ebert (1999) both support the building of learning communities to promote collaborative learning and to help students integrate into the institution.

### **Recommendations for Increasing Retention**

1. Establish and Maintain a Student Success and Retention Committee.
2. Provide New Student Orientation which is open to families and



partners of students. Provide information on all learner support services that will be available to students including counseling, mentoring and tutoring. Introduce students to peers, faculty, advisers and counselors at this time.

3. Identify at-risk students. Use freshman surveys for all students entering college for the first time and for returning adult students to ensure that students have declared majors/degree goals and to identify students who are academically underprepared for college. Provide follow-up in subsequent years.
4. Improve service quality to students by improving peer interactions, being responsive to student complaints and expressed needs and by improving the quality of financial aid advising and career counseling/clarification services.
5. Have a common first year where students and faculty get to know one another. Use block scheduling to build learning communities among students and keep professors with the same students (Tinto, 1996).
6. Establish academic and social interaction opportunities.
7. Accurately determine attrition rate by tracking individual students. Establish an institutional research department capable of tracking students.
8. Conduct exit surveys to determine why students leave.
9. Conduct an institutional self-study to determine where improvements are necessary and where the institution is successful in retention strategies.
10. Institute a tangible reward system for good teaching and faculty advising.

### **Conclusion**

Several recommendations have been made in this article. Each of the recommendations is dependent on institutional investment. Institutional retention strategies must be implemented in a measured way. For instance, institutions might focus too heavily on retention strategies and this could lead to a reduction in access to programs and institutions. In addition, institutional retention strategies and programs could be resource-intensive and could deplete other college areas of resources.

This article has addressed attrition and retention strategies in conventional programming. Further research could be conducted in the area of retention of students in distance education and online programs.

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